From Print to App: The Journey of Tabletizing Ball Bearings Magazine

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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December 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

December 2012

ABSTRACT

With the release of the iPad in 2010, interactive storytelling has become a tool being used by media publications to engage their consumers. The unique characteristic of the iPad being touch-based lends to many new ways of story presentation. The audience is now able to have an active role in receiving their daily information, rather than being a passive consumer. Just like several professional media publications, a team of Ball State student media designers and editors set out to create an iPad app for Ball Bearings Magazine. As the team leader for tablet development, this project was not as simple one. But after a semester of dedication, Ball Bearings Magazine is now available in the app store on the iPad. It was an eye opening learning experience that opened new doors to my future as a designer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Jennifer George-Palilonis for advising me through this project. Not only did she help me through this entire project, but was an incredible teacher, role model and taught me more than I ever could have imagined in my three and a half years at Ball State.

I would also like to thank Liz Spangler, Taylor Ellis, Sarah Phinney, Bryan Lord and Stephanie Tarrant for their work with Ball Bearings and help making this project a success.

FROM PRINT TO APP:

THE JOURNEY OF TABLETIZING BALL BEARINGS MAGAZINE

Many media professionals and consumers have asserted that the introduction of the Apple iPad in 2010 was a game changer when it comes to media distribution and consumption. A unique tool for displaying and engaging with interactive media, the iPad combines the rich multimedia potential of the web with the tangible, portable appeal of traditional print media. According to former Wired magazine creative director, Scott Dadish, "the storytelling methods that we use to make magazines today – the tools, the words, the pictures, the headlines that we all use – are every bit, or even more important going forward. It's not a case where we're dropping all of the things that we know and having to go learn a whole new language. It's just using those tools in different ways and experimenting (Garcia 2012, p.31)." The iPad represents a new opportunity for tablet-owning consumers to receive and experience information in a different way. The interactive potential of the iPad allows consumers to be more engaged with the information they receive in the form of magazines, newspapers and other publications.

Tablets have changed the roles of news and information audiences, in that they are no longer passive consumers. According to Mario Garcia, author of the interactive, multimedia iPad book, The iPad Design Lab, "the use of the finger is one of the unique characteristics of the tablet. The tablet is not a newspaper, an online edition or a television. But it can act at times like all of the above. In many ways, the tablet is more exciting than print and more engaging than a website. It creates an interactive relationship with the user, who wants to participate, not just read passively (Garcia 2012, p.15)." A successful news or magazine app must offer the user a different experience than its print counterpart. Having a touch-based experience changes many aspects of functionality and design and opens new doors for interactivity. Garcia notes, "the finger needs to be engaged in a tablet app, with tapping, swiping and all the other actions that are now available. You should be able to interact with a great pop-up intuitively, evoking an almost magical sense of engagement with the narrative (Garcia, 2012, p.38)." The iPad also allows users to have more up-to-date and accessible information available at any moment. The Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism recorded that tablet users are more likely to frequently follow the news than the general public (Mitchell, 2012).

The findings of the Pew Project suggest that the tablet-using audience is more eager to consume news and information through tablets. Discoveries of this nature and the trend toward consuming news and information digitally have led some publications to develop tablet-specific apps and content. On October 18, 2012, Newsweek announced it would be transitioning to a completely digital publication by 2013. In a note referring to this somewhat shocking announcement, editor Tina Brown wrote, "In our judgment, we have reached a tipping point at which we can most efficiently and effectively reach our readers in all-digital format. This was not the case just two years ago. It will increasingly be the case in the years ahead.... This decision is not about the quality of the brand or the journalism – that is as powerful as ever. It is about the challenging economics of print publishing and distribution (Stanglin, 2012)."

How is the translation from a print product to an iPad screen accomplished? The process is tedious and crucial to the success of the app. The app must be well thought out and developed from scratch. The product cannot simply be a PDF of the magazine placed into this new platform. The process of transforming a print product to a digital one requires a new way of thinking. There must be a perfect balance between functionality and the overall aesthetic of the original publication combined with new ideas of storytelling and content display. With this in mind, a team of student media designers and editors set out to create a tablet edition of Ball Bearings Magazine, a nationally recognized leader in scholastic journalism and collegiate student media. The project commenced Fall 2012 as part of the annual iMedia class, an immersive learning course dedicated to exploring novel, innovative interaction design strategies for new media platforms. I served as the team leader for the Ball Bearings tablet development, making all major decisions about presentation and interactivity. Although Ball Bearings is not the first student media organization in the nation to produce a tabletized magazine, we are among the first few to delve into creating content on this new platform and distributing our work alongside professional publications.

THE PROCESS

When I decided to take on this project as my honors thesis, I truly had no idea what I was getting myself into. There were dozens of late nights, several tears, multiple moments of anger and frustration, and days I did not think this could be done. But now that the process is over, I can truly say I have never felt so proud of a completed product. The second I saw the app live in the Apple App Store, my eyes filled with tears and I let out a screech of joy. But this app did not create itself overnight. It was an extremely long process that required examining how Ball Bearings should evolve as an interactive, digital publication.

STEP 1: DEFINING A STYLE

The process began long before I even started to build the app. Before it was possible to take Ball Bearings from its print form to the tablet, a few things needed to be improved. In recent years, the Ball Bearings design staff has never worked from a consistent design style. Every year, there is a new design editor with a new idea of how the magazine should look. Thus, before we could dive into the digital edition, we needed to develop a consistent design style and strategy for both the print and online versions. Thus, as the design editor for Ball Bearings, I spend the first month of school creating a design style. I probably made nine or 10 different prototypes until I began to get close to what we were looking for. My professors pushed me to focus on finding the essence of Ball Bearings by working toward a design that would attract and engage the entire campus, men and women alike. This was a huge struggle. But after I finally pushed through all of the hurdles, I was extremely happy with the outcome. Of course, nothing is ever perfect; but overall, the new look for Ball Bearings is clean, fresh, and engaging; and our content strategy seeks to appeal to a diverse population of readers. After this style was created, it was time to adapt it for the iPad.

STEP 2: THE ART OF TRANSLATION

iPad development started with a collaborative meeting among Ball Bearings editors. We analyzed the first issue to decide the best way to tell each story on this new platform. We really had to take a step back and look at each story with a new perspective; one that included interactive elements and multimedia content. The stories were no longer laying flat on a page.

This process was overwhelming. There is so much that we can do with the iPad, it becomes hard to separate between what we can do and what we should do. Sometimes we had ideas that looked amazing, but in the end didn't amount to much more than sheer eye candy. This is a huge problem in the world of design in general. There must be a solid editorial reason for every element that is used in a design. It can't just "look cool." Design must also contribute significantly to storytelling.

In addition to having to translate how the stories would be translated from print to the iPad, we also had to maintain consistency with the print edition in a way that could be reconfigured to fit the platform of the iPad. It took several tries for me to get the font sizing correct because it's important to note that reading text onscreen is very different than reading it in print. Thus, body copy had to be significantly enlarged to ensure a positive reading experience. I also added a new element to the top page folio that stated how many pages were in the story so the user knew to look for more content. There were several small details that I had to define in the new iPad style guide. I also developed icons to help users understand quickly when features included interactivity. These "affordances" are important because they help the user quickly understand how to effectively interact with the publication. It took a lot of different tests to get the size of those right as well. They did not need to be large, but they also needed to be big enough for the user to not skim over and actually engage with the content. After I finished the style guide for the app, it was time to start production of the first issue.

STEP 3: PRODUCTION

At the start of the semester, I spent some time learning the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite in InDesign in order to create the app. Although placing the content went smoothly, there were a few technical problems I ran into along the way. We had two videos for the first issue that we wanted to include in the app. But the file sizes were so large, they were impossible to embed into the pages. We had to come up with a solution of having the video "play" buttons link to the video on YouTube. Although this was not the ideal solution, it was better to have the video in some way than not have it at all. Toward the end, one of my main problems actually ended up being the organization of the files. In short, I had to do a lot of time consuming updating

NUMBER OF PAGES WITHIN A STORY
NEEDED TO BE DETERMINED SO THE USER WOULD KNOW IF THERE IS MORE CONTENT

SPACE FOR CONTENT
ALL CONTENT HAD TO BEGIN UNDER HERE TO ENSURE IT WAS ALWAYS SEEN

BODY COPY FONT
FANWOOD, 17/20

ICON SIZE
HAD TO BE JUST BIG ENOUGH TO ENGAGE USER, BUT NOT TOO DISTRACTING

FONTS
WERE CARRIED OVER FROM THE PRINT VERSION TO STAY COHESIVE WITH THE BALL BEARINGS BRAND

COLOR PALETTE
WAS CARRIED OVER FROM PINT VERSION TO STAY COHESIVE WITH THE BALL BEARINGS BRAND

and re-linking of files to get everything set up properly . Also, with the release of the retina display for the iPad, we had to develop two different versions of the app, one for iPads 1 and 2 and one for the iPad 3, a high-resolution retina screen. Because the retina display was twice the size of the original, the resolution for all of the photos had to be doubled for them to appear correctly on the screen. Again, this was a very time consuming but necessary task. Looking back, I realize I went about making the two different versions in an inefficient way. I should have waited until the first version was finished before creating the second, larger version. Instead, about half way through the first version being completed, I made the second version. Thus, I had to make every edit twice. However, in the end, I am glad I made these mistakes because now I have a better understanding of how the system works and best practices for future development. Sometimes learning the hard way results in a richer experience and broader knowledge base.

STEP 4: BEING PUBLISHED

After each edit was made, it was time to send the app to Apple. The first time an app is published through the Adobe Digital Publishing Suite, it takes five to seven days for Apple approval. Then, the app goes live in the Apple App Store. The Ball Bearings app was submitted on November 27, 2012 approved December 4, 2012. The app was available to all iPad owners for download on December 5, 2012 at around noon.

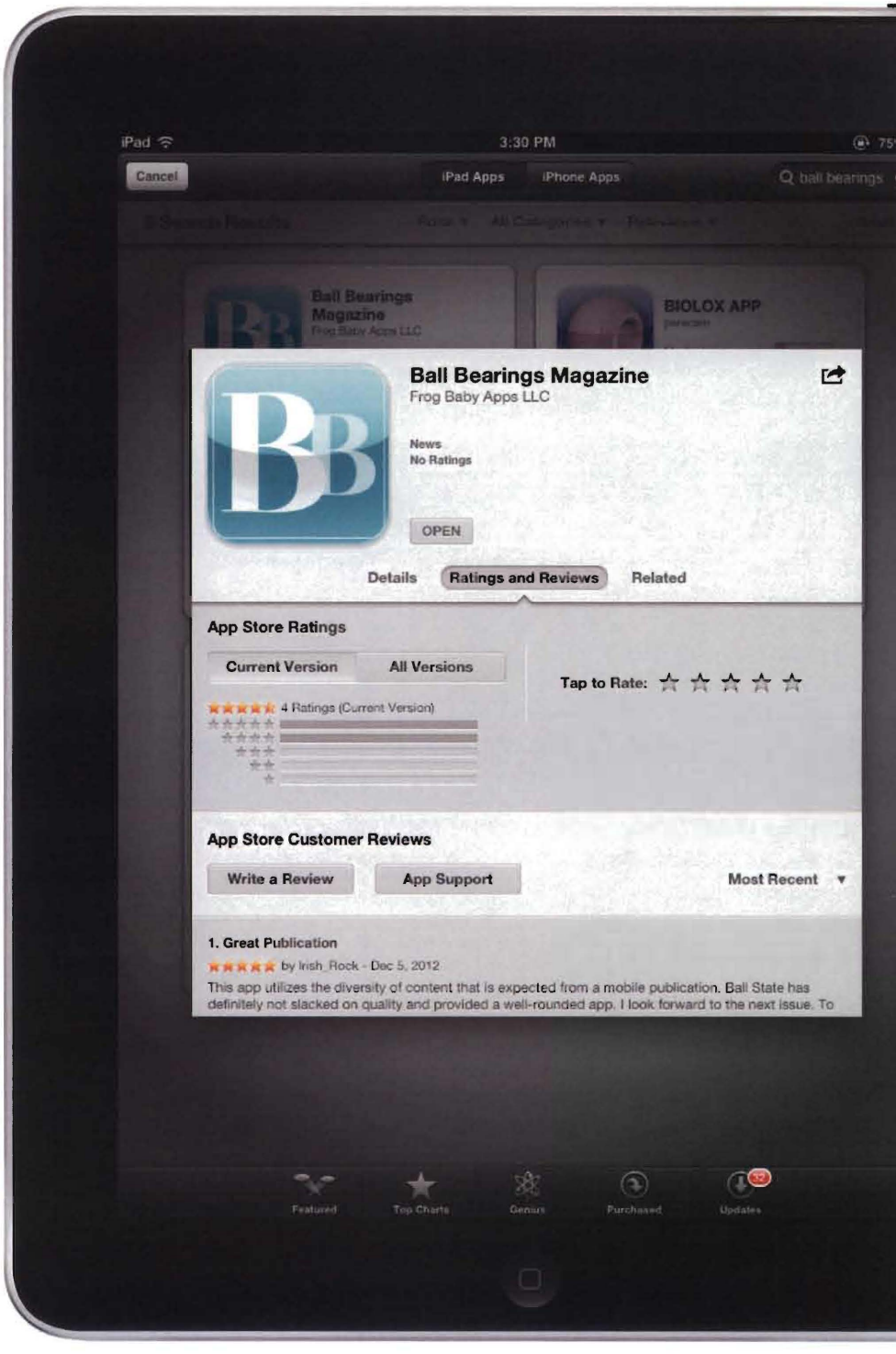
Watching the app download onto my iPad and opening it to see the magazine was an incredible feeling. Within the first 24 hours we had 47 downloads, two 4-star ratings and two 5-star ratings. We had incredible feedback on social media from professionals in the industry, Ball State students and other student media organizations across the country .

STEP 5: THE FUTURE

After creating the first issue the staff and I created the second issue, which will be available in the Apple App Store by December 14, 2012. Since I am graduating this semester, I will not be here to see the app through the rest of the year. However, a new position for an iPad editor has been added to the Spring 2013 Ball Bearings staff. This editor will develop the digital version of the magazine. Although Ball Bearings is only published twice each semester, the iPad platform also allows editors to add several mini, themed issues to the production cycle. This provides the Ball Bearings staff with a new opportunity to publish more often without increasing costs. They are planning special issues on a number of topics, including a Spring Break guide to an issue focused entirely on music. There are many creative opportunities now available to Ball Bearings. At present, the plan is to offer four tablet editions each semester, two that came out with the print edition and two mini issues in between.

REFLECTION

This project really opened my eyes to a new world. Because of this experience, I was also able to show my work at job interviews. As a result, I will be designing for both print and tablet platforms at my new job at TIME Magazine starting in January 2013. Not only did I learn new technical and software skills, but I also learned how to be a better storyteller. This project pushed me to become a more thoughtful designer, a better journalist, and to look at storytelling in a whole new light. Now, when I look at a story or hear a new idea, I automatically think about how it could be appropriately presented in the interactive, tablet environment. I know that this project changed my future as a designer and journalist.



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